

# THE SPIRITUAL IMPERATIVE OF CHOICE

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It is 2 a.m. I am sleeping in the chaplain's on-call room at an inner city hospital. My room hovers over the Emergency Entrance and the darkness is punctuated with sirens and lights. It is my night to be available for those unexpected things that happen in the night. But, unlike most of my calls, the call that pierces my sleep at 2 a.m. is expected.

It all began that afternoon when I was called to the obstetrics ward. A couple had come in concerned because the baby, due shortly, had stopped moving. An ultra sound revealed that the baby had died. They were preparing to induce labor. I was called to offer pastoral care to the couple, and to offer them the option of a naming ceremony once the baby was born. More and more we are realizing that miscarriages and stillbirths require grieving, often through ritual, for these babies are often full beings in the eyes of those who lose them.

I arrived at the obstetrics floor and was told that the couple wanted to quickly deliver the stillborn and go home. They wanted no support, no family, no friends. They wanted this to stay private. So you might wonder why the staff called me? Well, things change very quickly when one is dealing with life and death. We are often called in before the woman is induced so that we have a chance to build a small amount of trust. That way, if she changes her mind, she will be more likely to seek us out.

And so I approached their room, softly knocked, and made my way in. They were in a dimly lit room at the far end of the wing. Usually women who miscarry are put as far away from the other women as possible so they don't have to hear babies crying. He held her hand. She had her other arm wrapped around her large belly.

"Hello, I'm the chaplain."

"We don't want a chaplain."

"I know. I'm not here to force that on you. I am here to make sure you know your choices."

"What choices."

"Choices about what you want for yourselves and your baby. You may want a funeral or memorial. You may want a naming ceremony tonight. After all, you've been waiting for your baby, and now she's coming, just not as you expected."

"We really want to be left alone."

"I will be here all night if you want me. I can be paged."

Shortly thereafter they induced her. Three hours later she changed her mind. She wanted a full naming ceremony. Could I come visit her right away? She held my hand tightly and said she was so glad I had dared to visit. Would I be there as soon as her baby was born? Before I left her husband shook my hand so hard I thought it would break.

At 2 a.m. my pager went off. It was a beautiful ceremony. They claimed this baby as their own, honoring her short life and what she had given them. They named her and prepared to let her go. The moment was tender, raw and love-filled. We were gripped in the power, wonder, and mystery of life, and none of us would ever be the same again.

Now you may be wondering why I'm sharing this story at a service commemorating Roe V. Wade, which legislated freedom of choice. This story is not just about a couple losing their baby. It is about the experience of giving life, growing life, and making decisions about life. It is about how quickly things can change. It is about what you do with those unexpected, tragic things that can happen when one is gripped in the cycle of life. It is about having choices when faced with difficult decisions where no choice leaves you unchanged. There is a connection between the woman who lost her child, and the woman who decides to terminate a pregnancy. The life giving power of women's bodies is a deeply personal thing, undefinable by anyone except the woman herself. And yet we can so easily have our power taken at exactly the time when we need that power to make decisions about what is best for us and those we love. What it takes for us to keep our power is a society that deeply values us as women, that reveres life in all its complexity.

When engaging the issues of conception, gestation and birth, no one is left unaffected or unchanged. These are complex, meaning-filled experiences. They are universal experiences that touch every human life. Whether you are young or old, male or female, married or single, have children or not, want children or not, conception, gestation and birth touch all of our lives. They are particular experiences because every person will experience them in their own unique ways and give their own meaning to them. There is little black and white, no clearly defined code of ethics, no firm rule that can predetermine what is right and what is wrong when it comes to the cycle of life.

At least that is what I believe, and it is what many of you believe as well. Unitarian Universalism has adopted a pro-choice stance since choice became a political issue in the late 1960s. Given the strong influence of feminism within our religion, and our theological emphasis on freedom and equality, we have stood firmly behind the right of choice. Many of us will differ on how we understand abortion. Some Unitarian Universalists believe abortion is murder. However, most of us would be loathe to impose that belief on others. So we sit with the diversity, sometimes with discomfort, and allow it to be.

Unfortunately, we are facing a growing power that is hemming in the cycle of life. There is a war going on. It's been gathering steam since Roe v. Wade. The goal of that war has been to impose one meaning for conception, gestation and birth. There is a war going on to force women's bodies into one mold with one set of rules that is supposed to govern all. And, it is being done in the name of protecting life.

Now I want to honor the intention to protect life. After all, who wouldn't want to protect life? But, this well-meaning intention is creating consequences that are hard to ignore. The pro-life movement

does anything but protecting life. At the state and national levels, legislation is systematically chipping away at the rights established by *Roe v. Wade*: laws that require parental consent or the permission of a judge for minors to obtain abortions; legislation permitting hospitals and insurance companies to opt out of providing contraceptives and abortions and to dispense only selected information regarding reproductive health; legal decisions imposing a 24 hour waiting period between first counseling and abortion procedures; a ban on partial birth abortions with no clause concerning the health of the mother; and, promotion of abstinence-only programs rather than offering the full range of safer sex choices.

These measures are chipping away at the choices of women, and in particular, the choices of women of color and poor women. And what is happening? The United States has the highest teen pregnancy rate and the highest transmission rate of STDs in the western world. Foster homes are filled to overflowing. This nation is hurting, our children are hurting, our women are scarred, and yet those who claim to be pro-life have claimed the moral agenda as theirs.

It is time for liberal religious people to reclaim the moral agenda because those who are controlling it now are damaging our people. And I think that Unitarian Universalists are well-placed to do this because our religion provides a truer and better way of approaching human life than religions that view the world through one lens, one truth.

Now this is not something you usually hear from a Unitarian Universalist pulpit, is it, that we are a better way. I have to admit, I've been nervous about saying that since I wrote it in this sermon. We are not ones to openly say that what we have is better than another religion. We are historically quiet about who we are, so careful not to become like those self-righteous religions many of us left. We are so intent on being different, that sometimes it's hard for us to say that we are a religion, much less that we believe the religion we offer is better. And yet, in our quietness, we have marginalized ourselves, failing to spread our liberating message of freedom and equality to a world that desperately needs it.

It is time for us to be very clear about what we stand for, because if we don't, others will. If we continue to be quiet, we will be branded the religion that stands for nothing, where you can believe anything you want. Then liberal religion becomes synonymous for permissiveness, immorality and laxness.

We do stand for something. We stand for freedom, equality and compassion. We stand for a world that contains many truths. But, this is not a religion where you can believe anything you want, because we are called to the free and responsible search for truth.

We are accountable for the consequences of our beliefs. So although we promote freedom, it is not freedom at all costs. This is not a religion for lone rangers. This is a religion for lovers of freedom who are called into community, because in community we are held accountable for the consequences of our beliefs.

We believe that all religions have the right to exist. We have a history of practicing radical tolerance of beliefs that differ from ours. But often we think tolerance means affirming all beliefs as equally true. Well, not all religions are equally true. If we were to each look deep inside, most of us see some religions as better than others, but we are loath to say it. In our fear of judgment, we have abdicated

our right to judge beliefs that are damaging our society. Those beliefs have the right to exist. And, we have the right to judge them.

Now I want to be clear here. There is a difference between judging a person and judging a belief. We are not about judging people. We believe in the inherent worth and dignity of every person. However, we do have the right to judge beliefs. When women are dying, when women are being scarred and their families wounded because one set of beliefs is being imposed on them, it is appropriate to judge.

So here is my judgment. I offer you the choice of deciding if it can be yours.

The pro-life movement does not embody this nation's moral values of freedom, equality, compassion and responsibility. Its drive to promote one understanding of conception, gestation and birth, separates us from the power, wonder, and mystery of life, and it separates us from our own selves and from each other. When we try to simplify life and confine life, we lose out on life and life loses out on us.

When we reverence each woman's unique situation, we are entering the power, wonder, the mystery of life. This is what a pro-choice vision offers us. It opens us to life.

What I wish for this nation is to reclaim an understanding of life that cannot be confined, where every woman and man has access to a full range of choices so that we can each make free and responsible choices about what we do with and to our bodies.

But, that freedom is being dangerously threatened, and so we have some choices to consider making before we are denied the right to do so by this dangerous political agenda. Unitarian Universalists have something to say and something to do. The time for silence is over.

*Rev. Krista Taves is a member of the First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto and has served the congregation in many capacities, including Board Member, Board President and Lay Chaplain. It was here that she first felt the call to ordained ministry. She was ordained by the congregation September 26, 2004.*

*This sermon was written while serving as Interim Minister to the First Unitarian Universalist Church of New Orleans and was inspired by the rich experience of serving as a Resident Chaplain at St. Michael's Hospital in Toronto.*

*Although now living and working in the United States, Krista remains committed to the work and vision of the Canadian Unitarian Council and maintains her connections to the Unitarian Universalist Ministers of Canada. Krista has recently been called as the settled minister of Emerson Unitarian Universalist Chapel in St. Louis, Missouri.*